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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates the development of democratic practices and opportunities for decision-making at an early age. The paper cites numerous examples of how developmentally appropriate opportunities can be presented in the classroom. The paper outlines ideas for students to be more actively involved in making rules, leadership, classroom management, and decision making about what should be studied and how it can be assessed. (EH)

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CREATING A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY THROUGH THE CLASSROOM

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SO 028 584

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ABSTRACT

We live in a society which is theoretically democratic, however, democracy is not the reality. Certain groups hold undue influence in our society and use this influence to their advantage. We as educators are in an exceptional position to change the balance of power by utilizing democratic teaching techniques within the classroom, thereby helping to create a new generation of leaders and put the power back into the hands of the people.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular opinion teaching democracy in the classroom does not mean giving a few lessons on the history of democratic principles, and learning about George Washington and Abe Lincoln. Democracy is something we need to be taught to live and breathe. The true meaning of democracy is "a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system (Webster Dictionary, 1989, p. 384)." Democracy is not instinctual. Democracy is something we must learn in order to become effective citizens in a democratic society. Citizenship is both a right and a responsibility. In order to be effective citizens all members of a democracy must become problem solvers and analytical thinkers and not be afraid of asking the question "why?"

This of course is a hypothetical democracy not the reality we live in. In our reality people are not always taught to be problem solvers and analytical thinkers.

In this democracy we live in we often do not analyze issues in our daily routines. "This participatory sense of democracy requires more than just a social studies lesson or two on how a bill becomes a law. While certainly it is important to know how the government works (or doesn't work for that matter), it is even more important that citizens are equipped with the tools to make a democracy a daily reality (Teets, 1995, p. 1)." If we are to assume that democracy is not a reality for the majority of people in this society, then something must change in order to create the reality of democracy. We believe that change should begin in the early childhood years. As educators we can help to bring democracy to a functional level in our society by introducing children to its principles in the classroom. Which means at a very basic level, having children feel comfortable about offering opinions and taking chances. This is something teachers must provide in their classrooms. "Successful classrooms are safe communities where children are willing to take risks and offer opinions, where they respect their peers and the teacher, and in return are equally respected. Teachers have an important role in guiding children to use language to establish these communities (McCallister, 1995, p. 3)."

DEMOCRACY DOESN'T WORK FOR ALL CITIZENS

In theory, citizens in a democracy control the government equally and collectively. However, there are many examples in our society which point to the

fact that this is not the case. For example: there has been a redistribution of wealth in the United States which is one example of how this theory does not fit reality. During the Reagan regime the total income of the middle class increased on average of 4 percent a year. The income of the rich increased between 69 percent and 218 percent (Shannon, 1993, p. 88). The rich exert undue influence over governmental decisions, which affect all of our lives. This is not a conspiracy theory, it's a political fact (Shannon, 1993, p. 90).

As teachers in the south Bronx, we see the disadvantages that our children face on a daily basis and the lack of influence that their parents have over governmental issues. The reason this has occurred because the poor are not confident enough about their abilities as leaders and thinkers and instead, allow decisions to be made for them rather than being involved in the process. Until this is addressed decisions will continue to be made without their input. Often these decisions are not in the best interest of the people concerned. The school voucher system is one example of this. The media says schools are failing. The solution that the rich decide upon is the school voucher system. Basically in this scenario, each parent is given a voucher for some predetermined amount of money. For argument's sake let's say the number is $4,000. A parent can take their voucher and use it to pay for any school they wish. This is a great break for parents who are spending $10,000 a

year in tuition, they now only have to spend $6,000. The poor parents however, do not have an extra $6,000 to spend on school so their choices will be limited to schools which cost $4,000 per year. This leaves public schools as the only option. So, who is given a choice? What does this mean for public education? A decrease in funds available and further segregation of rich and poor, black and white.

WITH FEW EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES CHANCES OF SUCCESS ARE SLIM

With less access to quality education, the situation for the poor only becomes worse. They become less capable of breaking the cycle of poverty which leads to increased dependence on welfare and in some cases crime.

One example of this is a story of a baby who was born in jail and lived in the jail day care for the first 18 months of his life. As an adult he was sentenced to 25 years but was given 18 months credit for time served as an infant (Kozol, 1995, p. 146). This child never had a chance because all he ever knew was poverty, crime, and jail.

EDUCATORS MUST HELP BREAK THE CYCLE

"We need to create the conditions under which we can develop democratic voices at all levels of schooling so that together we can engage in an active public life (Shannon, 1993, p. 90)."

As teachers it is our responsibility to help break the cycle of poverty by giving children the tools they need to fight against a system in which the poor are oppressed. This is why our children must become intimately connected with democracy. It is only through active participation in the democratic process, that all of its citizens' needs can be heard and until this point, it has only been the needs of the rich being heard.

Part of the reason that some of these problems have occurred is due to the fact that citizens have not been trained to function in a democracy throughout their entire lives. We in education must change this. "We must provide opportunities for all citizens to learn how to work together, how to read critically and write for an audience, how to take a stand and how to change your mind, how to vote and how to organize (Wood, p. 1992, p. 2)."

HOW DO WE BREAK THE CYCLE?

Since we are both second grade teachers we feel that the practice of introducing children to democratic principles can and should begin at an early age. What this means is that we need to allow children to begin making decisions which are developmentally appropriate to their age group and maturity. By doing so we are preparing children for increasingly difficult decisions as they develop. These decisions will affect their lives and the lives of their classmates on a daily basis the

way that voting will affect their lives and the lives of all citizens. Of course, the level of decision making needs to be developmentally appropriate to the age of the child. Obviously, we should not expect a two year old to decide when to cross the street. He must have many experiences with this, holding his parents hands at first, then walking next to his parents, then perhaps crossing the street at his parents directions and then finally after years of practice he will cross the street by himself. At some point the child must be given the opportunity to cross the street on his own otherwise the child will never learn or become confident to cross independently. "We know that young children require firm clear control by grown-ups many times each day, but these necessary "control" situations should be balanced by activities in which we trust children by transferring power to them whenever possible (Hendricks, 1992, p. 51)."

In the classroom this analogy holds the same. Children should be making decisions about what they would like to learn. Children have voices and enter school with a certain cultural background.. It is the job of the classroom teacher to incorporate this information and take advantage of it. Again some discretion should be used. "Unless teachers and students are allowed and willing to listen to each other, to explore the variety and historical and social origins of their differences, to use their multiplicity of voices in any classroom their is little hope for democratic

development in our society (Shannon, 1993, p. 92)." This does not imply, however, anarchy. There is a time, a place, and a procedure to voice an opinion. Our role as teachers is to familiarize children with these guidelines while still allowing children to make choices. "How teachers (and all of society) choose to handle these conflicts and our diversity makes all the difference in how we will live together in and out of school (Shannon, 1993, p. 92)." Typically, teachers have made all of the decisions about what was going to be done in the classroom. Gradually the teacher should incorporate more input from, students , having them brainstorm and make choices about the direction of classroom projects. Or she might strengthen academic integrity by sharing with students the state objectives that have to be met, involving students in helping to decide how they can demonstrate meaning given objectives through their project work. Gradually, bit by bit, the classroom teacher is able to turn over more of the responsibility for learning to the students themselves (Teets, 1995, p. 3)." Thus, creating a democratic environment in which all of the citizens of a classroom take part.

Children should not only make decisions on their course of study but also should have input into the management of the class. Classroom management would include rules and consequences for behavioral and academic work, room arrangement, and classroom maintenance. Children's suggestions need to be

considered if we are to validate their opinions. Children should be involved in setting classroom policies. At the beginning of the school year many teachers dictate the rules to the children such as "Thou shalt not hit", "Thou shalt hand in thine homework on time", and the "consequences of your disobedience shall be a phone call to your mother"or "write I will not hit a million times".

Making Rules

In a democratic classroom children would help create the rules. If asked, the children would probably come up with a rule stating "no hitting" because most have experienced being hit and know it is not pleasant. Children probably would think of fairly reasonable consequences for their actions considering the fact that they may be at one time the hitter or the person being hit. Therefore, not wanting the consequences too strict or too lax. This is an example of validating a child's experience and trusting that children are developing competency as decision makers.

By having children developing their own rules of etiquette they take on ownership of these rules and begin to develop a sense of themselves as being rule makers and decision makers in democracy, not as subjects of a dictatorship.

Reading

Democracy is not only about making and following rules. These are some other things we feel are important qualities that citizens in a democracy should have.

It is also about knowing how to research a topic, collect data, analyze, and to interpret the information collected, having the ability to work together as a team, to problem solve, to argue one's point well, being creative, being informed enough to have a valid pinion and knowing how to appropriately voice your opinion. The question then becomes how do we teach children to do these things? This should be happening on a daily basis in every aspect of the curriculum.

For example, after having read with children we should involve them in dialogue about what has been read. This type of dialogue should be centered around higher level thinking questions rather than simple closed ended questions. For example: asking a child how a character is feeling. The child should respond to why the character is feeling a particular way and how this relates to that child's own experience. In order to provoke this kind of thought we must also consider carefully the books we choose for our students. We must remember that they have their own cultural background and experiences and will be most interested if they can bring their prior knowledge to bare on what they are reading. "To read we must ask questions, implicit questions, not ones we are aware of, just as we must ask implicit questions to comprehend spoken language. But the questions readers ask must vary with the material they are reading, which is why prior knowledge is so important (Smith, 1985, p. 97)." Conversely, a question that is not terribly thought provoking

is something like, "What happened on page 95?"

Both of these questions can be used to see if the children are paying attention but only the former will determine whether the child has an understanding of what has been read. The point of reading is comprehension. In order to comprehend something you must think about what you are reading. This is what we are trying to develop in children, not a simple memorization of facts and figures. "Learning and comprehension cannot be separated. Comprehension is essential for learning and learning is the basis for comprehension. The process for comprehension and learning even seem to be fundamentally the same. In order to comprehend one must predict, in order to learn one must hypothesize, and both the prediction and the hypothesis come out of our theory of the world (Smith, 1985, p. 88)." We want children to mature into citizens who not only can read the issues in the newspaper but who understand the issues as well, and who will offer an opinion in favor or against what they have read and comprehension is a key to having an opinion.

Decision Making

In order to develop children's democratic sense teachers must allow children to make decisions concerning their lives everyday. One technique that can be used to develop children's decision making ability is to allow children to take part in the running of the class. One technique we find useful is having the children "teach"the

class. This program was developed to involve students more in the learning process. The way it works is each day a child is selected as teacher of the day. This is a completely voluntary program but we have had one hundred percent participation since its inception. At the beginning of the day the child student teacher is responsible to move children from one activity to the next, run the morning routine, and to solve discipline problems within the class. After completing their role as teacher the other children in the class have the opportunity to critique the student teacher. At the beginning of the year some children are upset about critical comments from their peers but as times go on they learn to moderate their teaching behaviors and become better able to accept constructive criticism. Also, as time goes on the quality of the critique improves.

Our thinking on this is that children must learn to become leaders. By taking charge of a class of their peers children are learning to become leaders . They are also learning effective communication skills which they will necessarily need in order to motivate their classmates to follow their lead. Children also come to the understanding that the person sitting in the front of the room is not infallible whether it be a child or an adult. This is analogous to understanding that a government is not infallible and needs to be questioned. By taking charge of a class of their peers and by learning to critique and take criticism these children are becoming acclimated to

the fundamental principles of a democracy.

Math

As we mentioned democracy that democracy should be an integral part of the entire curriculum. Math should not be forgotten when developing a democratic classroom. One might ask, "How can math be democratic or undemocratic?" We feel that problem solving is an important attribute of the citizens in a democracy and the focus of mathematics should be problem solving not rote memorization. Unfortunately, mathematics in many classrooms is just that, rote memorization. This type of learning does not involve children to engage in any problem solving. "Research reveals although students can perform arithmetical computations adequately they are not able to use their skill to solve problems. Students who understand mathematics can think and reason mathematically and use what they have learned to solve problems, both in and out of school (Burns, 1992, p. 3)." As teachers it is important to find ways to engage children actively in their mathematical learning. When children learn math it is important for them to understand the reason for their learning. If for example, the topic one is teaching is subtraction one should not begin the lesson by saying "O.K. boys and girls, today you are going to learn how to subtract." This phrase implies that the teacher is the keeper of knowledge and the children are empty vessels to be filled. This presumes that the children have not

background with the topic.

Alternatively, we might begin a lesson by asking children, "Can anyone tell me what the word subtraction means? Does anyone know why we use subtraction?" This helps the teacher to determine what the children already know and it helps to validate the children's own background knowledge. At this point, the teacher could give a real world situation in which children might use subtraction. For example, "You go into the store with fifty cents and you want to buy a soda for seventy five cents. Can you buy that soda? If not, how much more money to you need?" At this point you can begin to demonstrate different procedures for solving this problem. By doing so we have impressed upon children the fact that mathematics is something useful and worth learning. We can know begin to develop hands on experiences within the classroom. "Knowing mathematics means being able to use it in purposeful ways. To learn mathematics, students must be engaged in exploring, conjecturing, and thinking, rather than only rote learning of rules and procedures. Mathematics learning is not a spectator sport (National Counsel of Teachers of Mathematics, 1989, p. 5)."

Setting up a store is an example of such a hands on experience. This activity would engage children's problem solving abilities while also engaging their interests. In this scenario children buy and sell items, set prices for these items, and through

the use of play money learn about the function and value of currency in our society.

Everything we teach must have significance within the society in which we live. We have given some examples of how to incorporate the functioning of our society into the classroom. We feel that through developing an understanding of how our society works, we are giving children the basic tools that they will need to become effective participants in a democratic society. They will know how to create and shape the society by using their problem solving skills. They will know what the important issues are and will have the decision making ability to decide which causes are worth fighting for. By teaching and allowing children to participate in establishing rules they will come to an understanding of the difference between just and unjust laws and will have the skills necessary to change the ones that are unjust and to create ones that would be just. This would mean "not just having a vote on options already determined behind the scenes...but in essence eliminating official behind the sceneness (Edelsky, 1994, p. 252)."

Finally, we feel that these skills are necessary for children to develop these skills from an early age because only through the use of these skills will these future adults and leaders be able to function in a true democracy.

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